Exploring COIL Experiences and Shifting Attitudes Toward Study Abroad in Japan

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During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, collaborative online international learning (COIL) was often promoted as a replacement for study abroad, but there is a dearth of studies exploring the role of COIL beyond the global emergency shutdown. This phenomenological study examines the lived experiences of 11 Japanese university students taking a cross-cultural COIL course with partners enrolled in intermediate Japanese courses at two North American universities. During the data-collection period, the Japan-based participants completed surveys, journals following five different COIL tasks, and post-intervention reflective interviews. By employing Moustakas's (1994) modified version of descriptive phenomenology, four themes emerged composing the participants' essence of experience: safety, unexpectedness, authenticity, and intercultural competences. Participants also considered COIL as a means to better prepare for overseas experiences, as opposed to a replacement. Results from this study provide implications for educators and administrators who wish to better utilize COIL for more impactful international education programs.

COVID-19 パンデミックの最中、オンライン国際共同学習（COIL）はしばしば留学に代わるものとして推進されたが、世界的な緊急停止を超えた COIL の役割を探る研究は乏しい。この現象学的研究では、北米の 2 つの大学の中級日本語コースに在籍するパートナーと共に異文化間 COIL コースを受講した 11 人の日本人大学生の生活体験を調査した。データ収集期間中、日本在住の参加者は、アンケート、5 つの異なる COIL タスクに従った日誌、介入後の振り返りインタビューに回答した。Moustakas（1994）の修正版記述的現象学を用いることで、安全性、意外性、信頼性、異文化間コミュニケーションの発展という 4 つのテーマが浮かび上がり、複合的な経験の記述となった。参加者は COIL を、海外経験のためのより良い準備のための手段であり、代替物ではないと考えた。本研究の結果は、COIL をより効果的な国際教育プログラムのために活用したいと考える教育者や管理者に示唆を与えるものである。

Keywords: collaborative online international learning, COVID-19, descriptive phenomenology, internationalization, study abroad

During the COVID-19 pandemic, educators around the world resorted to technology in helping provide cross-cultural experiences for students (Nguyen et al., 2022). Collaborative online international learning (COIL) emerged at many global institutions as an alternative to study abroad (Liu & Shirley, 2021), and this provided a boon to *internationalization-at-home* initiatives (Buckner et al., 2022). Internationalization-at-home is a concept defined as "the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments" (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 69). Internationalization-at-home has been considered as a viable option for Japan's universities, even during pre-pandemic times, as a result of decreasing numbers of Japanese students going overseas and increasing numbers of international students on Japanese campuses (JAOS, 2018).

This resulted in some efforts to better integrate foreign students into Japanese campus life; however, the COVID-19 pandemic forced stakeholders to re-evaluate internationalization-at-home approaches and to seek alternatives to traditional study abroad. In response, educators began learning and using a variety of online platforms to facilitate synchronous and asynchronous cross-cultural interactions (i.e. virtual exchange and COIL) with students from other countries, such as Zoom (zoom.us), Padlet (padlet.com), and Flip (info.flip.com). Now that study abroad numbers amongst Japanese students are nearing their pre-pandemic level (Masutani, 2023), there is a notable gap in the literature involving the experiences of Japanese university students with related online programs, and how such programs may complement the internationalization objectives of the Japanese government and its institutions. One could posit that greater interest and willingness in study abroad will increase if virtual exchange programs can continue to evolve in a post-COVID world.

Since the launch of the Inter-University Exchange Initiative in 2011 (MEXT, 2012), the Japanese government and its higher education institutions have prioritized and promoted study abroad as an opportunity to develop intercultural competences, professional soft skills, and second language (L2) abilities (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Kobayashi, 2018; Nowlan, 2020). In March 2023, Prime Minister Kishida announced plans to annually send over 500,000 Japanese students overseas for study abroad by 2033 (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2023). As a major obstacle in achieving this goal, many Japanese students are reluctant to study abroad due to factors such as costs, a lack of global mindset, and anxiety with English language use (Burden, 2020; Kobayashi, 2018; Nowlan, 2020; Nowlan & Fritz, 2022). To help overcome such barriers, the author feels that higher education stakeholders should consider adapting the technology used during the pandemic to foster internationalization-at-home and study abroad preparedness, which could increase access to and participation in study abroad. Educators should also consider the role of COIL in the classroom; however, there is a paucity of studies examining the possible role of COIL, now that study abroad programs have resumed. To generate more insight into how COIL may complement international programs in this post-emergency era, the current study aims to address the following research questions:

RQ 1. What do Japanese university students experience during bilingual (English and Japanese) COIL?

RQ 2. How do Japanese university students experience bilingual (English and Japanese) COIL?

RQ 3. How do Japanese university students perceive COIL as preparation, in comparison to replacement, for study abroad and what implications does this have for educators and administrators?

Literature Review

Compared to the topic of study abroad, research into COIL is in its infancy and a fertile area for development. This study is situated at the intersection of research into (a) internationalization-at-home, (b) COIL, and (c) study abroad intent. Internationalization has been a focal point of Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), as seen through its numerous initiatives, including the Top Global University Project and Global 30 (Yonezawa, 2017), which emphasize student mobility. Despite recent challenges, such as decreasing outbound study abroad numbers and the COVID-19 pandemic (JAOS, 2018, 2021),

the Japanese government has placed emphasis on internationalization-at-home, including a focus on COIL programs. This section will first introduce COIL, followed by a review of the literature related to COIL and its benefits in international education, and finally, the role of phenomenology in international education will be discussed.

What is COIL?

Many educators use the terms "COIL" and "virtual exchange" interchangeably, though there are notable differences in terms of overall engagement and degree of collaboration. The author's institution recognizes the following three categories of collaboration, based on a definition of COIL established by the State University of New York (SUNY): (a) isolated interactions called *virtual exchange*, (b) at least two interactions during the semester (but fewer than 30% of the total course content) called *mini COIL*, and (c) a course that is composed of at least 30% online interactions and collaboration, called COIL (SUNY, n.d.). A key feature of every COIL program is a "collaborative" component where students from participating universities work together on a common issue or discussion (Rubin & Guth, 2022). The history of virtual exchange in Japan dates back to 1999 where it was predominatly applied to native-language exchange with regional neighbors (e.g., Taiwan and South Korea), but more recently, there have been interdisciplinary COIL initiatives, and collaborations between MEXT and the American Council of Education (ACE) to strengthen the COIL network between Japanese and American institutions (Ikeda & Onorevole, 2022).

COIL has been promoted as a more inclusive, ethical, and accessible form of cross-cultural exchange that is carbon-neutral and conducive to stimulating foreign language learning, global citizenship, and intercultural competences (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). While the current paper considers numerous interpretations of intercultural competence, the term generally involves effective interaction and communication with people from different cultures, encompassing knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Deardorff, 2006). Multiple interpretations of intercultural competences, and its complementary elements, have resulted in integrative models, such as Nguyen et al.'s (2022), which combines approaches of Byram (1997), Deardorff (2009), and Helm and Guth (2010). Nguyen et al.'s (2022) integrative approach was applied to the current study and will be discussed in the results section.

Benefits of COIL and Intercultural Competences

COIL, or courses that are composed of at least 30% online interactions and collaboration (SUNY, n.d.), have been shown to develop the global mindset and intercultural competences of its participants. For instance, Zheng et al. (2022) identified improvements to the global mindset of American and Chinese virtual exchange students in a business program. These findings were corroborated by Liu and Shirley (2021), who incorporated COIL and virtual reality between American, German, Brazilian, and Indian students. In the Canadian context, Amaral and McLay (2021) identified numerous benefits of COIL, including enhanced digital literacy, language learning, affordability, improved graduate employability, and intercultural competences. In respect to intercultural competences, the development of intercultural knowledge and skills were identified as advantages. In Japan, Chu and Torii (2021) found some evidence that participants improved their intercultural competences from COIL with partners in Taiwan and the Philippines, while Fritz and Marchewka (2023) established an association between intercultural skills and desired global human resource outcomes amongst 19 Japanese undergraduate students who completed a four-week virtual exchange project with partners in Poland. Findings from

these Japan-based studies generally corroborate the intercultural competence developments from other international contexts; however, there remains a lack of robust research into the Japanese context using phenomenology, a gap the current study can help bridge.

In evaluating intercultural competence developments using COIL, some studies have shown mixed results depending on the origin of the participating students. For instance, through a quasi-experimental design involving 108 students from the USA and the Netherlands (Hackett et al., 2023), significant intercultural competence was only shown amongst the American students and not those from Europe, suggesting that the effect of COIL may be reduced if one is exposed to other international input during the investigation. One common feature of all the aforementioned studies is that COIL was being conducted as *replacement* for study abroad, without considering the potential of such collaborations as *preparation* for study abroad, especially in a post-COVID context.

Phenomenology and International Education

Edmund Husserl, considered as the father of phenomenology, called for a descriptive philosophy that yields an essence of pure experiences based on immediate experiential evidence (Husserl, 1973). Modern examples of this include using phenomenological methodologies to determine the experiences of parents with children doing remote learning during COVID-19 (Cahapay, 2021) and of Black women in distance-education programs (Rogers, 2018). Today, the two most common types of phenomenology utilized by researchers are descriptive and interpretive. While both approaches focus on understanding and describing human experience, descriptive phenomenology aims to yield a pure and unbiased description, while interpretive phenomenology recognizes the role of greater researcher interpretation to better understand the phenomenon in question (Tatano Beck, 2021). Interpretive phenomenology has been used in the Japanese higher education context (Past & Smith, 2023); however, a descriptive approach was chosen for the current study to maintain a focus on the described participant experiences.

Descriptive phenomenology has been used to examine study abroad, as Henry (2014) explored the experience of higher education advisors who guided students with their destination choice, while McGaha and Linder (2012) applied the methodology to learn more about the impact of study abroad on preservice teachers. Typical of all descriptive phenomenological studies, the researchers were expected to remove themselves from the analysis, a process called *bracketing* or *epoché*. In the process of bracketing, the researcher is meant to suspend all judgements with the intention of minimizing bias or suspending one's attitudes and beliefs when evaluating the phenomenon. While several variations of descriptive phenomenology have emerged (Giorgi, 2009; Dahlberg et al., 2008), the current study centers around Moustakas's (1994) modification of Van Kaam's (1966) approach, due to participant numbers and research setting.

Van Kaam's (1966) descriptive phenomenological methodology and Moustakas's (1994) share many features, but they also differ in certain ways. The two methodologies both involve a preliminary stage of grouping significant statements into themes, followed by a reduction process, and elimination of redundancies and less prevalent elements of experience. In the Moustakas modification, this process yields *textural descriptions* of experience, or "what" was experienced. However, following the phenomenological reduction process, the Moustakas (1994) modification includes a methodological technique called *imaginative variation*, which involves individual *structural descriptions* for each participant, or "how" the phenomenon was experienced. The latter description could be considered as more subjective; however, by applying

bracketing, the researcher is expected to consider various underlying structures within the data to explain the textural descriptions, while composing a final description of experience based on all empirical findings. A discussion of how this was achieved is described in the next section.

Methodology

To determine the experience of Japanese university students with COIL, a descriptive phenomenological design, based on Moustakas (1994), was adopted. This section will provide details of the participants and research setting, the two COIL courses involved, the analytical procedures, and finally, a section considering the trustworthiness and quality of data.

Participants

This study involved 11 participants, who were all enrolled at the same large, private university, located in the Kansai region of Japan. All participants were born in Japan, had Japanese citizenship, and considered Japanese as their first language. They were also all enrolled in the author's cross-cultural studies COIL course in English and self-reported having intermediate-level English abilities of either B1 or B2 on the CEFR scale, or a TOEIC score between 550 and 785. Since the enrolled COIL courses were electives, it was assumed that all participants had a pre-existing interest in intercultural communication. Individual details of the 11 participants can be found in Table 1. As a summary, at the time of data collection, participants were undergraduate students in different years of study and enrolled across a range of faculties. All participants identified as female, with the exception of one male (P3). The participants were split relatively evenly in terms of their past experience with study abroad, with six of 11 having prior experience. In accordance with the institution's ethical guidelines, informed consent was received by all participants.

Table 1
Study Participants

Participant	Year of Study	Gender	Faculty	Prior study abroad?
Spring 2023				
P1	1st	F	International Studies	Yes
P2	1st	F	International Studies	No
P3	2nd	M	Sociology	No
P4	3rd	F	Law & Politics	Yes
P5	3rd	F	Humanities	No
Fall 2023				
P6	3rd	F	Business	No
P7	1st	F	International Studies	Yes
P8	4th	F	Human Welfare	No
P9	4th	F	Economics	Yes
P10	2nd	F	International Studies	Yes
P11	1st	F	International Studies	Yes

The number of participants involved in this study are consistent with the expectations involved with phenomenological studies of this nature. While descriptive studies following the Van Kaam (1966) methodology can range into the hundreds, the adopted Moustakas modification has involved as few as one participant (Sullivan and Bhattacharya, 2017), with many others ranging from five to fifteen (Fargnoli, 2017; Mpuang et al., 2015), being consistent with the current study.

The COIL Courses

The participants in this study were drawn from two different sections of the same cross-cultural studies COIL class: one during the Spring 2023 semester and one during the Fall 2023 semester. While the timing and order of the COIL tasks differed slightly due to the scheduling compatibility with the North American universities, the contents and goals of all tasks were similar.

The first section of the class, held during the Spring 2023 semester, involved a collaborating university in a southern US state. This US-based class was comprised of 11 students who were enrolled in a full-year intermediate Japanese language course. Over the course of one month, the US-based students and five students from the Japanese institution completed five COIL tasks: two collaborative synchronous tasks via Zoom and three asynchronous presentation and discussion tasks via Padlet. All five of the Japan-based students voluntarily agreed to provide data for this study.

The second course, held during the Fall 2023 semester, involved a collaborating university in Eastern Canada. Similarly, this Canada-based class consisted of eight students who were enrolled in a full-year intermediate Japanese language course. Over the course of two months during the semester, the Canada-based students and eight students from the Japanese institution completed five COIL tasks: three collaborative synchronous tasks via Zoom and two asynchronous presentation and discussion tasks using Padlet. Of the eight students in Japan, six voluntarily agreed to provide data for the current research project.

The contents of the two classes were nearly identical, involving approximately 20 hours of direct and indirect contact. For instance, they both involved tasks (synchronous and asynchronous) of introducing themselves and ice breaking through question-and-answer periods. As for the collaborative element of these COIL courses, a comprehensive investigation was conducted of how the students' respective countries are represented in the media. Asynchronous videos and synchronous discussions were done that explored the role of regional-based stereotypes and prejudice, and the role that media, education, and experience play in the forming and propagating of such ideas. Since the L2 learning goals differed between participating students (English vs. Japanese), all tasks involved dedicated English and Japanese components. For instance, in the initial ice-breaking activity, students first introduced themselves and answered question in English, followed by the same process in Japanese.
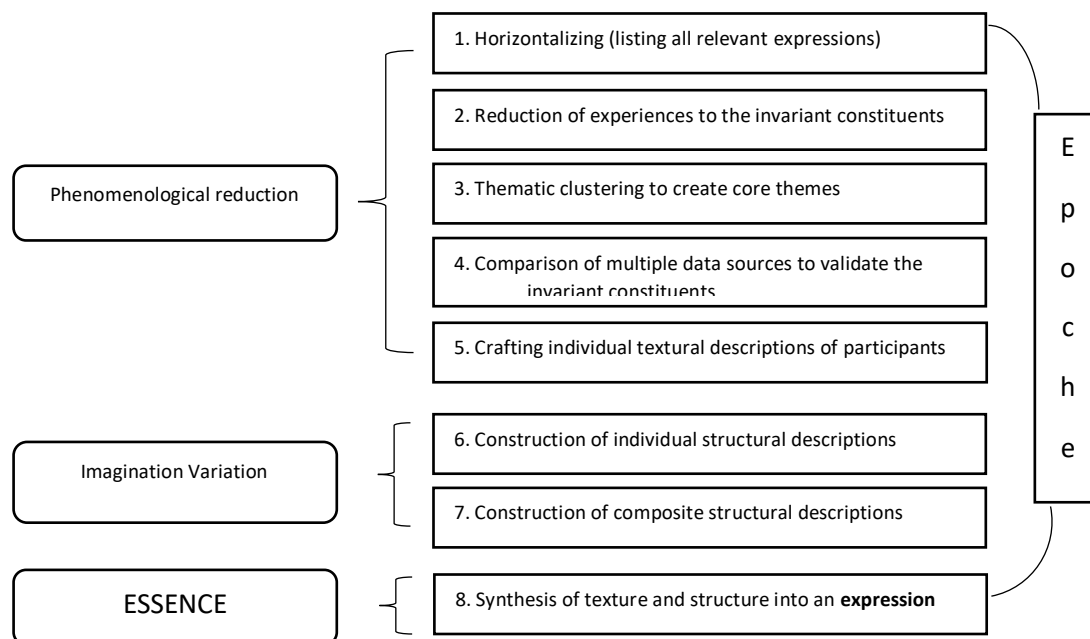
Analytical Procedures

Adhering to the discussed transcendental phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994), participants completed (a) an initial background questionnaire, (b) reflective journals after all five COIL tasks where they were essentially asked "what" they experienced and "how" they experienced it, (c) a final reflective survey involving general open-ended questions about overall experience, and finally, (d) retrospective interviews that lasted approximately 20 minutes. Questions posed during all phases of the data-collection process were bilingual (Japanese and

English), interview data were transcribed, and for those interviews done in a language other than English, data were translated by a professional translator who was not otherwise associated with the research project or its participants. After the data were collected, both MAXQDA software and Microsoft Word were used to analyze the data in accordance with a modification of Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological framework.

       The eight steps of Moustakas's (1994) methodology are illustrated by Yüksel & Yildirim (2015) and shown in Figure 1. Essentially, (1) the author began the analytical process by examining the background survey, the journals, and the final reflective survey for significant statements related to the COIL experience, while cleaning the data for repetitive and irrelevant comments, which resulted in 265 significant statements making up the participants *horizons*, or present experience. (2) The process then involved grouping the significant statements into themes, and (3), further defining the themes through thematic clustering to determine the core constituents of the phenomenon. Next, (4) the author compared the individual participant journals and surveys to ensure consistency and accuracy. If there were any discrepancies, the final interviews were used to seek clarification. As the final step of the phenomenological reduction phase, (5) textural descriptions provided the foundation for individual narratives of the phenomenon. From this point, (6) the process of imaginative variation began where the author referred to the data in attempt to determine "how" the experiences occurred for the individual participants via a structural description, then (7) these descriptions were compared between participants to identify commonalities, thus making a composite structural description. As a final step (8), the textural (the "what") and structural (the "how") descriptions were combined into an overall expression of experience, or the essence of experience across all participants.

Figure 1

Modification of Moustakas' (1994) Transcendental Framework (Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015)

Phenomenological reduction	
	1. Horizontalizing (listing all relevant expressions)
	2. Reduction of experiences to the invariant constituents
	3. Thematic clustering to create core themes
	4. Comparison of multiple data sources to validate the invariant constituents
	5. Crafting individual textural descriptions of participants
Imagination Variation	6. Construction of individual structural descriptions
	7. Construction of composite structural descriptions
ESSENCE	8. Synthesis of texture and structure into an **expression**

Epoche

Note. From "Theoretical frameworks, methods, and procedures for conducting phenomenological studies in educational settings" by P. Yüksel & S. Yıldırım, 2015, *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, *6*(1), p. 11, https://doi.org/10.17569/tojqi.59813. In the public domain.

Assessing Trustworthiness and Quality of Data

Despite being contested terms (Tatano Beck, 2021), *validity* and *reliability* are still expected standards in many phenomenological studies, though a different parlance is often applied. In a qualitative context, validity can mean that "the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures, while qualitative reliability indicates that the researcher's approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects" (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). This particular study employed validity strategies to assure the reader that findings are trustworthy and of high quality.

As a key feature of transcendental phenomenology, the author attempted to bracket themselves out of the study through self-reflective journaling. This process helped identify possible biases, such as preferences and pre-conceived notions based on the author's gender, race, nationality, socio-economic-background, and personal history with international education and technology. To further enhance the quality of the current phenomenological studies, the author followed Polit's (2017) criteria for more valid and reliable data. The following points highlight such criteria and offer detail on how they were satisfied in the current study:

1) Prolonged engagement: the current longitudinal study involved data collection over the course of a full academic semester of approximately four months.

2) Persistent observation: the data collection was always related to the phenomenon of COIL with different L2 learning goals and the experiences of participants.
3) Triangulation: the study involved multiple sources of data including a background survey, reflective journals following all five COIL tasks, a final survey, and a reflective interview.
4) Member checking: considering the different types of data, participants were asked in the interview to confirm and elaborate on prior statements from the reports.
5) Negative case study and discrepant information: before the final themes were established, the data were scanned for exemplars and instances that could possibly challenge the themes.

Results

Through the methodological process outlined in Figure 1, it was determined that participants in this study experienced (1) comfort and safety, (2) unexpectedness, and (3) authentic interactions. These three themes compose the textural description of the study, while a fourth theme–intercultural communication skills–represents the structural description, or "how" the phenomenon was experienced.

In accordance with Van Kaam, the four themes were determined as "explicitly or implicitly expressed in a significant majority of explication by a random sample of subjects" and "also compatible with those descriptions which do not express it" (van Kaam, 1983, p. 118). Additionally, for the fourth theme of intercultural competences, Nguyen et al.'s (2022) integrative approach to intercultural competences was adopted, which considers Byram's (1997) qualities of an intercultural speaker, Deardorff's (2009) process of becoming interculturally competent and Helm and Guth's (2010) online literacies model (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Nguyen et al.'s (2022, p. 3) Integrative Approach to Intercultural Competences
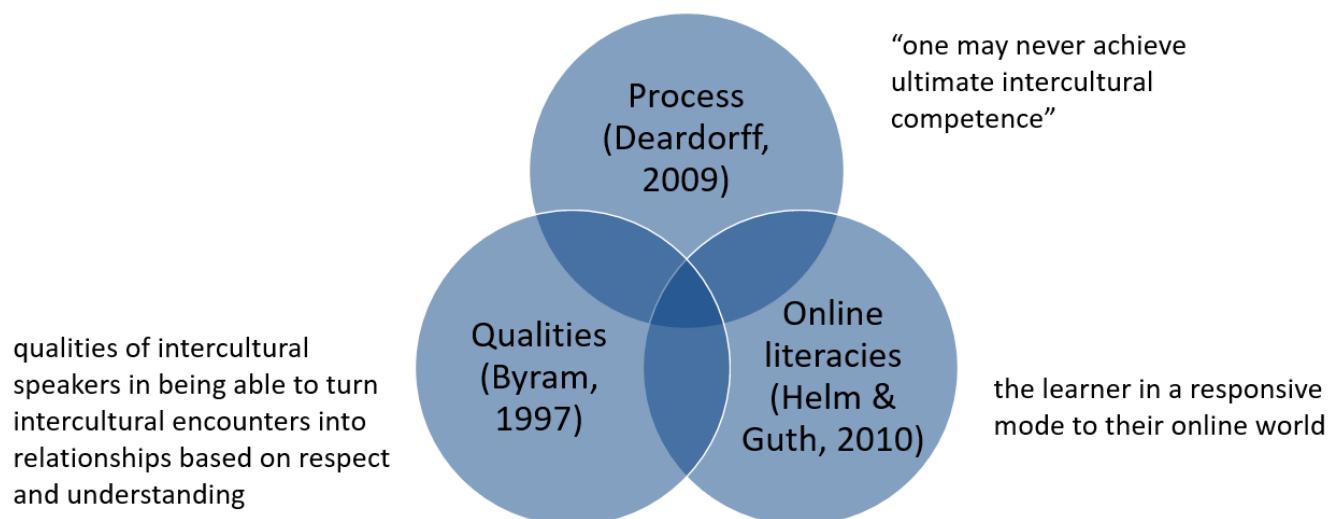
Note. From "Cultivating intercultural competences in digital higher education through English as an international language" by H. Nguyen, H. Dolan, S. Taylor, & T. Peyretti, 2022, *Journal of Academic Language and Learning*, *16*(1), p. 3. In the public domain.

Theme 1–Comfort and Safety

Participants in this study expressed a degree of initial anxiety during the five tasks, as many had limited experiences talking to non-Japanese people in English. For instance, P1 said "I was anxious before talking to the American students, but I felt more comfortable and confident after learning they were interested in me." A lack of confidence was corroborated by several others, including P5, who said "I was unconfident at first… but quickly realized I did not need to be afraid." Another key factor that led to comfort and safety during the tasks was the fact that the North American students were studying Japanese, thus interested in Japanese language and culture, as P11 opined that "I could feel comfortable knowing that they (Canadian students) like Japan." Finally, in discussing the COIL experience through the lens of study abroad preparation, P10 shared that "many students, like me, are afraid of studying abroad, so having the opportunity to have online discussions with foreign students can help reduce the fear gap."

Theme 2–Unexpectedness

Due to a lack of exposure to cross-cultural communication, it is possible for stereotypes, and perhaps prejudicial thoughts, to pervade one's thoughts about "the other." This attitude seemed to prevail amongst the participants, as most shared P1's sentiment: "I thought the American students would be loud and outgoing, so was surprised when some were as shy as me." In another instance, P4 claimed that "I was delighted when I could communicate with (the Canadian students), because I assumed I would not be able to understand them."

In the responses given by all 11 participants, there was at least one instance of "surprise," "shock," or recounting an experience that was not "expected," or contrary to what the participant "imagined." The unexpectedness for some participants in the study was not directed towards the North American interlocutors, but instead themselves: "I found it surprisingly difficult to use level-appropriate Japanese," (P8) and "I was surprised and disappointed that I did not know more information about Japan" (P10). Finally, a significant majority of the participants expressed surprise about the amount of communication that was possible following the posting of asynchronous videos onto Padlet: "I was able to learn more than I expected about their home and cultures through the videos" (P7) and "the (American) students made a lot of comments, which were contrary to my expectations, and which made me very happy" (P1).

Theme 3–Authenticity

The data yielded numerous exemplars where students commented on the authentic or "real" nature of intercultural communication using the prescribed platforms of Zoom and Padlet. Most participants discussed the nature of their usual L2 classes as "unidirectional, led by the professor" (P2), and having learning environments "where we often listen to the teacher, only speak English with other Japanese students, and learn about the culture of other countries based on what we research on the Internet" (P9). The COIL experience, however, provided an environment where participants could "talk to real foreign students who are learning Japanese" (P11), and "learn directly from people from the culture, as opposed to media-based stereotypes" (P7).

Similar to the results in the previous theme on unexpectedness, participants also reported authentic learning opportunities, not just of the foreign culture, but their own culture. For instance, P11 claimed that the COIL experience allowed her to "be more objective about how Japan is viewed by the world," and P10 mentioned that discussing stereotypes that people may have of Japan and Japanese people is something she "cannot learn in Japan."

Finally, participants in the study were able to realize that being "American" or "Canadian" cannot be reduced to a number of set qualities or characteristics, due to the multicultural and diverse nature of these countries. P2 was impressed by "America's culturally diverse society," as one student in the collaboration was from Taiwan, and another from Mexico, thus "reflecting the greater population."

Theme 4–Intercultural Competences

The first three themes discussed above represent the textural description of experience, or "what" the participants experienced during COIL. This fourth theme, however, represents a structural description of experience, or "how" the participants experienced COIL. Based on the data, participants were able to operationalize their existing intercultural communicative competences while also developing new intercultural skills.

Participants went into the COIL program with expectations of improving their spoken language skills, and many claimed to have achieved this by enacting and developing intercultural competences and other cross-cultural skills, as represented in Figure 2. In terms of intercultural speaking developments, the data predominantly focus on improved confidence and enjoyment, as participants could make themselves understood during the conversations. As an extension of this, especially during the Zoom sessions, participants commented on the use of facial expressions and other nonverbals: "I was able to know when to talk more, based on their positive facial expressions" (P3), and "I became more aware of the use of eye contact and body language, and realized that their use is quite different between American and Japanese people" (P4).

In terms of developments in cultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills (Nguyen et al., 2022), it became clear that students experienced the phenomenon of COIL, not just through the newly acquired intercultural skills, but also existing intercultural abilities. Such intercultural developments ranged from the more superficial assimilation of cross-cultural knowledge and attitudes to complex understanding and appreciation of "the other." From the level of acquiring knowledge, exemplars were found across all 11 participants, including thoughts such as "I deepened my understanding of Canadian culture" (P7) and "I now know that I can easily start a conversation with a foreigner by asking lots of questions about that person's country" (P10). Regarding the development of cultural attitudes, P2 stated that "the COIL interactions increased my capacity to understand and accept cultural differences" and this was reflected amongst numerous participants, including P4, who admitted that "I was able to challenge my own prejudices of (Americans) and became aware of some previously unconscious stereotypes that I held of them."

As a goal of the intercultural communicative competence model (Byram, 1997), some participants did show evidence of achieving critical cultural awareness from the interactions. For instance, P1 reflected that "based on the differences between all members from (the American university), I was able to realize that such differences apply to all cultural groups, even in a country like Japan with little diversity." Additionally, P4 commented that "we had many commonalities with (the American students), including our ways of thinking and behavior, which made me feel close to them and realize that we are all the same as humans and that labeling and generalizing is very limiting behavior."

Perceptions of COIL as Preparation or Replacement for Study Abroad?

The data from the post-task reflections often referred to study abroad, either as a comparative measure or for context when discussing the benefits, demerits, and overall

experience of COIL. To help better understand the perceived relationship between COIL and study abroad during the current post-emergency COVID era, participants were explicitly asked about the potential role of COIL, as either preparation or a replacement for study abroad, during the final interview.

A common sentiment amongst participants was the "real-time" nature of COIL where "like study abroad, we cannot prepare for the questions and comments we get from the other students making it very different from our usual English classes where we can prepare for everything." It was unanimous amongst all participants in the current study that "COIL made (them) more interested and better prepared for study abroad" (P2). In many cases, the role of confidence emerged in the discussing of COIL as preparation versus a replacement for study abroad: "I became more interested and confident in speaking English to foreigners and this makes me want to study abroad more" (P5).

Despite the literature that suggests intercultural competence developments amongst students who participate in COIL, most of the participants in the current study were explicit that COIL, while having numerous benefits compared to the usual language classes, is not an adequate replacement for study abroad. For instance, P11 recognized that COIL with learners of Japanese provided a "safe space" for communication, though they were left wanting the challenge of "interacting with students who do not know much about Japan through study abroad" (P9). Also, P7 suggested that "COIL is not a suitable replacement for study abroad for those who want to be immersed in an English-speaking environment." One participant (P8) reconciled the idea that "COIL would need to be quite frequent and held over a long period in order to be an alternative to study abroad," while others, such as P7, suggested that "COIL would be an ideal first step for those who want to acquire cultural knowledge before going overseas." In summary, a significant majority of participants thought actual sojourns were the only way to get first-hand experience about culture and to have interactions with a broad cross-section of individuals in English.

Participants in the current study also recognized the potential for COIL to increase willingness to study abroad amongst local Japanese students who might otherwise self-disqualify from overseas study: "there are not many opportunities to speak English to foreigners in Japan, so COIL is a great first step for students to get interested in going overseas" (P10). Other participants supported this notion, as P1 touted COIL as "not only useful for study abroad, but also daily life." Also, P3 said that in COIL, "we can truly understand how people from other countries appear and communicate, and this would spark an interest in study abroad amongst most students in Japan." The same participant (P3) also shared an idea that COIL with North Americans will expose Japanese students to many varieties of English, and that this "is a first step to getting interested in foreign culture and getting comfortable talking to foreigners."

Discussion

In this section, a composite description (i.e., the essence) of experience will be shared, thus answering research questions 1 and 2 of this study. Then, implications for higher education stakeholders will be shared, including suggestions on how to integrate COIL into an educator's curriculum. The section will conclude with limitations of this study and possible future research directions, based on the findings.

Composite Description of Experience

Based on the data provided by the participants in this phenomenological study, the essence of experience with bilingual (Japanese and English) COIL can be represented with the following expression, thus answering research questions 1 (what was experienced?) and 2 (how was it experienced?). Essentially, Japanese university students enrolled in such a COIL program can experience a comfortable and safe learning environment, where the North American partners represent numerous linguistic groups and have an inherent interest in Japanese culture. While the Japanese participants may enter the program with anxieties, biases, and stereotypes towards the partner students, actual outcomes often challenge and reverse such expectations, leading to a means of cross-cultural exchange that exceed expectations of knowledge acquisition, not only of the target North American culture, but also knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of local Japanese culture. The role and balance of authentic synchronous and asynchronous tasks allowed participants to gain confidence in their abilities to communicate cross-culturally in the target language and a greater appreciation of ethnic and cultural diversity in North America. These three constituents–comfort, unexpectedness, and authenticity–were experienced through the operationalizing of pre-existing and recently-learned intercultural competences, that were even further developed through the COIL interactions, leading to some evidence of critical cultural awareness.

Pedagogical Implications

Japan is faced with unique challenges in developing internationalization, both at home and abroad. Since Japanese university students are often described as inward thinking and risk averse (Yamada & Yamada, 2014), MEXT has struggled to increase interest in study abroad, especially in comparison to pre-COVID outbound participation rates of regional neighbors, such as China and India (Altbach, 2009). As a result, internationalization-at-home and COIL should take precedence in Japan, not as a replacement for study abroad, but for its potential to create a virtuous circle where study abroad numbers may increase with more engaging and effective domestic programs. In answering research question 3, the participants of this study support the notion that COIL can help students acquire confidence and a more positive outlook of face-to-face interactions with English interlocutors, thus potentially increasing study abroad intent and participation. Participants in the study shared the opinion that COIL may not act as an ideal replacement for study abroad, though it can help prospective international travelers feel more comfort and safety in an authentic multicultural environment, thus enabling pre-existing intercultural competences while developing new skills.

Findings from the current research corroborate past studies that established a connection between COIL and intercultural competences. For instance, like other studies discussed in the literature review (Amaral and McLay, 2021; Chu & Torii, 2021; Fritz & Marchewka, 2023), this COIL course did yield reported improvements in intercultural competences and skills. While it is important to note there was a study that challenged the notion that COIL can improve intercultural competences (Hackett et al., 2023), this negative case study involved students from the Netherlands who had prolonged domestic exposure to intercultural phenomena both prior to and after the intervention. Since university students in Japan report little opportunity for interacting with people from abroad, it is believed that results from the current study better reflect positive intercultural competence developments.

Establishing a COIL program may seem to be a daunting task for educators and administrators. First, there may be concerns that it is difficult to find a suitable collaborator,

based on course content and student needs. Second, there may be complications due to time zone differences and finding a period where all potential participants are available. Finally, educators may worry about the time dedication needed to launch such a program in replacing or complementing existing curriculum. Based on personal experience, establishing COIL does require a short-term increase in workload; however, there are numerous online resources to facilitate the process. Educators and administrators can visit and register themselves on the COIL Connect website (coilconnect.org), where they can find global partners across a wide range of academic disciplines or place a recruitment advertisement on the website. Another recommendation to find a suitable partner would be to identify a desired region, country, institution, department, and educator, then to contact that department or educator to see if there is any interest in a collaboration. This approach was successful in finding the Canadian collaborator in the current study. After finding a collaborator, it is then imperative to discuss mutual times that would work for synchronous activities and to establish learning goals and tasks to be completed. While it does take effort to successfully launch such a program, the benefits gained by students and educators often outweigh the required, yet temporary, increase to workload. If successful, educators should find COIL advantageous, even if learning goals are different, as they were in the current study.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

One limitation of the current study is the relatively small number of participants ($N = 11$) who provided data. While this number is well justified within the parameters of Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological research design, it would be desirable to obtain data from university students in other regions of Japan, and not simply from one institution in the Kansai region. Having a wider range of voices across geographic regions would make the findings more generalizable to Japanese university students. Furthermore, it would be valuable to expand on this longitudinal study to include data from those students who went overseas following the COIL program. For instance, following study abroad, would participants continue to have a positive impression of their pre-departure COIL, or in hindsight, did they find COIL unhelpful or perhaps even hurtful in comparison to what they experienced overseas? Finally, while Table 1 shows a binary result of whether the participants in the current study previously studied abroad, there would be greater value in learning more about study abroad duration, destination, and course of study to consider its impact on the COIL experience.

The current study involved a COIL partnership with universities in Canada and the US– destinations that continue to be very popular amongst Japanese university students. However, Japanese university students often self-disqualify themselves from study abroad due to the perception that such inner-circle countries are expensive, anxiety-inducing, and require high proficiency with the English language (Kobayashi, 2018; Nowlan & Wang, 2018). As a result, few students consider destinations in the Expanding and Outer Circle, such as countries in Southeast Asia, where they have ample opportunity to develop soft skills, intercultural competences, and English as a lingua franca (ELF) abilities (Nowlan & Fritz, 2022). A clear future direction would be to explore the experiences of Japanese university students who do ELF-based COIL with partners in Southeast Asia. The current study revealed that participants felt greater comfort communicating with speakers of different linguistic backgrounds, aside from English, so it could be posited that ELF-based COIL would yield even greater benefits in relation to comfort, confidence, L2 output, and intercultural skills. It is possible that COIL with partners in Southeast Asia could increase interest in study abroad, not only to this region, but globally,

thus contributing the governmental goal of sending over 500,000 Japanese students overseas annually by 2033.

Conclusion

Results from this study suggest that university students in Japan experience COIL as a welcome departure from their usual L2 curriculum, as it provides a comfortable, spontaneous, and authentic international learning environment, conducive to the enactment and development of intercultural competences. Additionally, participants revealed that COIL can act as a suitable preparatory stepping-stone that may better prepare students who are planning to study abroad, while also inspiring students with prior low intent to enroll in overseas sojourns. From the perspective of educators and administrators, the technologies used during the COVID-19 pandemic can be re-purposed to support different types of virtual exchange, which can have the dual benefits of internationalization-at-home and increased access to and participation in study abroad, which may help the Japanese government reach their ambitious student mobility goals.

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